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Mary's Apostolic Role in History

JOHN TOTTEN, S.M.

Number 24

ABOUT THE AUTHOR . . .

Brother John Totten, S.M., is a member of the St. Louis Province of the Society of Mary and is presently teaching in Milwaukee. His personal study during most of religious life has concerned Mary's influence in the apostolate of the Church. The present reprint is a summary of a paper read at the first Marian Institute of the Marian Library (1953) in which he developed the nature of this influence as manifested in its historical effects.

Brother Totten's previous assignments found him stationed in Texas and Missouri. For several years he was associated with the **Catholic Authors** staff in St. Louis and assisted in the production of the new Four-Sight and Crown editions.

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MARY'S APOSTOLIC ROLE IN HISTORY

JOHN TOTTEN, S.M.

The Nature of the Subject

By Mary's role in history we mean her part in the apostolate or mission that Our Lord has given His Church. He sent the Church to bring the world to God. We are concerned with defining Mary's role in this work. Now we understand an apostolate or mission when we know the **PLAN** of the one who does the sending. God's plan for the Church can be known either in His own statement of it in **REVELATION** or in its **BEING WORKED OUT** in time. It is by this latter method that we are to approach our subject—by the historical method.

Some difficulty attaches to this particular method because history gives us innumerable facts; and facts, though absolutely necessary, are in no way sufficient for our purpose. The essential thing in grasping Mary's apostolic role is to see all that she does for the Church in **that single pattern which explains it all**. And that is no easy task because she does so much. It is like trying to state in one sentence all that a mother does in a family. A list of her works would be endless, and what single work can be conceived as summing up everything, unless it be simply that of being mother. But to say this is simply to name the mystery, not to elucidate it. So it is with the apostolic role of Mary. A list of her benefactions will not suffice, nor will a name for her role. We must rather **use the facts to penetrate in depth the nature of her role** and there grasp the **principle** from which all her contributions spring.

Our Method of Development

Our development will follow this plan: we begin with facts to show that **HER INFLUENCE IS DECISIVE** on both (1) **EVENTS** and (2) **CULTURE**. Then we consider Her as their cause: her influence is **PERSONAL** both (3) in **LEADING** and (4) in **BUILDING**. Finally we consider the **NATURE** of her influence: **HOW** is it exerted? (5) by what **MEANS** and (6) by what **VITAL FORCE**? If we diagram this plan of development in two columns as below:

Her influence is decisive

(1) on **EVENTS** (2) on **CULTURE**

Her influence is personal

(3) in **LEADING** (4) in **BUILDING**

How is it exerted?

(5) by what **MEANS**? (6) by what **VITAL FORCE**?

then the topics on the right are related to the corresponding topics immediately to their left as the **basis** of an action is related to the **action** itself. Thus a people's culture (2) moulds their outlook on life and their habits of thought and thus constitutes the **basis** of their way of acting, giving a distinctive character to the events (1) of their history. Topic (4) is related to topic (3) in like manner, as also (6) to (5).

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1. MARY'S INFLUENCE IN CHURCH HISTORY IS DECISIVE IN THE DEEDS SHE HAS INSPIRED

When is an Historical Influence Decisive?

It is important that we all attach the same meaning to the word decisive. Consider the fight against Communism. Many forces have opposed it. None have, as yet, been decisive against it. The Nazis and Fascists rose to power largely as anti-Communists. And the immediate effect of their influence was the practical extermination of Communism in the areas under their control. Yet the long-term effect of their efforts has been to strengthen its position. Capitalists have opposed it. They have not been effective. Nor have laborers. Nations have opposed it in the realm of diplomacy and even arms—ineffectually. Why have all these efforts been indecisive? Many reasons can be given. One seems to sum up most of them. All these forces have in some measure been **infiltrated**, if not by Communists themselves, then by Communist ideas and thought—by materialism, naturalism, and anti-religion. This infiltration by Communist thought is more deadly than infiltration by Communists themselves, because it is more dangerous and more difficult to prevent. Now my point is this: Mary's influence is decisive against evil because it cannot but be utterly pure. It is not subject to infiltration by evil.

How Her Influence is Decisive

In this connection, Father Calkins tells a story about the first Sorrowful Mother Novena in New York City. The Church was overcrowded and a long line of people stretched down the street. A rather belligerent Communist approached the line. His book of revolutionary tactics told him that every popular mass movement was a potential sounding board for Communist propaganda. It was up to him to muscle in and take over. He did so, insisting on his right in this free country to join any movement for the relief of the poor and oppressed. He met little opposition. Once established, he took the next step: What are we protesting against? What are we demanding and of whom? A rather amused man told him: "We are protesting our sins and asking for grace of the Mother of God." The Communist's jaw fell. The book had not foreseen this. He fled in consternation. Infiltration into this movement was impossible. There was absolutely nothing that could be twisted to his purpose here. That is the point: Mary's influence is decisive for good because it is so purely good. It expels evil motives.

She Purifies Motives

The Crusades, after the victories of the first two great efforts, bogged down for years. And why? Largely because the supernatural motives of the Crusaders tended to become more and more mixed with selfish natural ones. The commercialism of the maritime cities of Italy, their rivalry with the Byzantines, the nationalism of the leaders and knights, their desire for personal glory, plunder, ease—all these false motives rendered their efforts ineffectual and at times evil. It was when Our Lady acted that motives were purified and decisive progress

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was made against the Moslem heresy—as at the foundation of the orders for the redemption of captives or at the battles of Lepanto and Vienna.

These actions were decisive. Of John of Matha, James of Aragon, and Peter Nolasco she asked an ultimate purity of intention when she asked them to take a vow to ransom captives of the Moors even at the cost of their own freedom. Perhaps she chose Don Juan to lead at Lepanto because, having no title to gain and none to lose, selfish motives had little hold on him. He was, in Chesterton's words, one "whose loss is laughter when he counts the wager worth." (**Lepanto**) It was thus that he acted and so he won for her.

And so also did Sobieski at Vienna. Belloc insists that before Vienna in 1683 Kara Mustapha had every advantage of numbers, material and diplomatic position. He had an army of more than 200,000 men. With this in prospect Sobieski set out to answer the call of the Holy Father with only 8000 men to relieve the besieged garrison of only 15,000. He and his men stopped at Czestochowa to pray for a blessing on their arms and then advanced to join with other Christian troops arriving at Vienna September 11 to make up an army of some 80,000. Sobieski publicly placed all his trust in Our Lady; he fought accordingly and won decisively. History is filled with like victories, as at Muret, La Rochelle, Temesvar, and Belgrade.

She Builds on Faith

The key to them seems to be this: To serve her is to embrace noble motives and to reject base ones. And why? Because she asks that those who love her act on the purest and completest Faith—on the motives of Christ. Chesterton has immortalized this truth in his **Ballad of the White Horse**. Alfred, crushed by the overwhelming superiority of the pagan Danes, begs her for a sign of victory: To him she answers:

"The men of the East may spell the stars,
And times and triumphs mark,
But the men signed with the cross of Christ
Go gaily in the dark.
But you and all the kind of Christ
Are ignorant and brave.
And you have wars you hardly win
And souls you hardly save.
I tell you naught for your comfort,
Yea, naught for your desire,
Save that the sky grows darker yet
And the sea rises higher.
Night shall be thrice night over you,
And heaven an iron cope.
Do you have joy without a cause,
Yea, faith without a hope?

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The Means She Uses

There it is—the ground of hope she offers is Faith, pure Faith. On this she builds, slowly if need be, but irresistibly. On this basis she calls for prayer, for penance, for the accomplishment of duty. You recall: this is her message at Fatima—substantially as it was at Lourdes.

Jacques Maritain has studied these means in learned works, examining their efficacy as social and political instruments. Prayer and penance he terms **spiritual means** and the accomplishment of duty a "poor temporal means." There is a note of irony in the adjective "poor," as also in the qualification "rich" in the phrase, the "rich temporal means." Under this he includes: power, money, influence, politics. Our Lady's means, the **spiritual** and the **poor temporal means** have this quality—they exercise a power that grows imperceptibly; they overcome obstacles by a kind of irresistible, cumulative force.

You have surely at some time or other watched waves lapping the edge of a beach, and dramatized in your mind the effort of each succeeding wave to reach farther than the last. It is a lesson in the futility of half-measures. That is the way the **rich temporal means** work. Each quickly achieves an immediate tangible gain, but almost as quickly relinquishes it and must be succeeded by another. They are indecisive. The means by which Our Lady builds come in like the tide, bearing waves on its breast, but scarcely using them, strong in its own right—decisive, irresistible. So, while the Protestant princes struggled feverishly for political power, wealth, and diplomatic position in the countries of Europe, forces trained in the school of Mary went far beyond the boundaries of the old world, to bring to the true faith the teeming millions of Asia and America, and to give her glorious name to innumerable islands, seas, capes, rivers, and lands.

Why This Method is Natural to Her

Her influence is decisive because it is as natural to her to inspire Faith as for truth to inspire assent. She reveals in herself the basic truths of the Faith. When the Gnostic heretics denied that Our Lord had a real human body, Christians joyfully pointed to her. There is His Mother, they said. When the Arians denied the divinity of her Son, it was in His Virgin Mother that the decisive answer stood revealed: He was conceived of the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary. She reveals in her very being and action the ultimate realities of Christianity. So also for the distinctively Christian virtues: humility, virginity, the spirit of prayer and sacrifice; virtues so foreign to the instincts of man's fallen nature. It has been enough that they adorned her immaculate and loving heart that they should be forever in honor among Christian men. It matters not how mysterious they may seem; millions seek them in every age and clime—because of her.

"As the innocent moon, that nothing does but shine
Moves all the laboring surges of the world."

(Francis Thompson: **Sister Songs**)

We conclude then that her influence over the actual EVENTS of history is decisive because it is an influence sprung from the ultimate truth and reality of

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Christ, Who is the vital force in all apostolic efficacy. This first point has deserved this somewhat lengthy treatment because it is the foundation of the others.

2. MARY'S INFLUENCE IS DECISIVE IN THE FIELD OF CULTURAL WORKS

When is a Cultural Influence Decisive?

It is necessary to establish that Our Lady's influence is decisive in the development of Christian Culture. Genghis Khan influenced the events of his time and yet made no truly decisive mark on history because the changes he wrought had no firm or lasting cultural foundation. He failed to bring men to a vision of life and reality so clear and so intensely realized that they would express and preserve their experience of it in works of art which would in turn convey it anew and ever-living to succeeding generations. Mary has accomplished this to a degree unequalled by any human person.

The Testimony of History

We have already seen that in her very being and activity she is a revelation of Christian truth and life. To Catholics and Protestants alike she sums up, in the words of Chesterton, all that the Church has to say to humanity. Christian artists have vied with one another to convey as a living experience what she has meant to them. In the music of countless **Ave Marias** they have expressed the reverent joy of a fallen race in the presence of her who brings God to them. These together with the other masterpieces of Marian music have made their vivid appreciation of her love and goodness an experience that can be enjoyed by all succeeding generations.

What music has done for the mystery of the Annunciation, painting has done for that of the Nativity and all the mysteries it enshrines: the mystery of God's love, of His strength in weakness, of His riches in poverty. The works of Fra Angelico, Raphael, Murillo, Botticelli, Andrea del Sarto and a host of others have for centuries penetrated Christian souls with the truth:

"Short arm needs man to reach to Heaven

So ready is Heaven to stoop to him."

(Francis Thompson: **Grace of the Way**)

So also the Pietas and the Calvary Groups of the master sculptors. For centuries they have imparted to Christian peoples a vicarious experience of the intrinsic worth of suffering, sorrow, and penance—the **poor spiritual means**—and have thus saturated Christian thought and life with her spirit.

The Marian Library of Dayton is itself a living proof of Mary's influence on literature. Surely no woman has exerted so potent an influence through the written word as she. And then there are the great cathedrals, those **Summas** of Marian truth erected in stone—Chartres, Notre Dame, the Duomo, and a hundred others. They have made her ideals the nourishment of Christian souls. Dante could hail as accomplished at least in part the goal of Christian culture in this, that God's ideal of human perfection should be cherished pure

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the more perfect which are based on more fundamental truths; whose mode of action governs a greater segment of life; and whose acceptance of that mode is the more intense. In this light a religious order is seen to be an institution of a very perfect kind, for it is based on ultimate truths of faith, which give rise to a complete regimen of life which must be accepted permanently by vows. Now Our Lady has in history exerted a direct and personal influence in the foundation of very many religious institutes. She has in her apparitions commanded the foundation of some, as the Mercedarians, the Servites, the Norbertines; or encouraged others, as the Trinitarians, Carmelites, and Dominicans; others have arisen due to inspirations received at her shrines—as the Carthusians, Franciscans, Jesuits, Marianists, and many others. Still others have been founded to spread particular insights into her mysteries. All of them, in all their members, draw their inspiration from a living awareness of her personal guidance and care—an awareness that leads nuns and sisters each to take her name as their own. For what is more personal than one's name—unless it be Our Lady's care?

5. HOW SHE EXERTS HER PERSONAL INFLUENCE IN HISTORY

If we abstract from the almost limitless diversity of locations, customs and rules that distinguish the institutions she has founded, we can discern in all of them a striking point of similarity—the spirit of prayer that pervades all.

Prayer Permeates All

All that she does is done with reference to prayer—to inspire prayer, to encourage it, and to reward it. Marian religious orders are devoted by preference to prayer. Marian customs are customs of prayer—the Rosary, processions, novenas, hymns, consecrations . . . Her shrines are houses of prayer. Marian art is the art of prayer and of Churches. Her victories are begun by prayer, won by prayer, and commemorated by prayer. Her role in the Church is associated with prayer from its very origins. Her entire life was a life of prayer. Some of the earliest figures of the Catacombs—the orantes—associate her with the Church in prayer.

Her Role as Intercessor

That great supernatural institution—the Liturgy—sums up our relations with her as that of clients before their **intercessor**. Indeed this seems to be her essential role in the life of prayer that has grown up under her influence: the role of intercessor. The cry of the Church to Mary is ever: "Pray for us; pray for us, now and at the hour of our death." This is more than a coincidence, and is worthy of some thought. The act of intercession seems to depend essentially on this: that there be a union of will between the client and the intercessor—that they both desire the same thing together. It seems to be the role of Our Blessed Mother to bring about this conformity between the wills of her children and her own will in order that the power of God, by which she achieved her mission while on earth, may find no obstacle in the wills of those who now carry on that mission today.

6. WHAT IS THE ULTIMATE BASIS OF HER INFLUENCE IN HISTORY?

The ultimate basis of Our Lady's influence must be that which accounts for the initial union of the wills of her children with hers—a union which, however tenuous and hesitant it may be, gives to the bounty of her intercessory power a recipient, willing and ready to accept and to receive it. The question that confronts us is this: Upon what **basis** is this **initial** union of wills built?

The Miracle of the Vistula, 1920

An example may help to fix the question clearly in mind. The Communists, in 1918, having seized power in Russia, gained for themselves a breathing spell by making peace with Germany. By 1919, with Eastern Europe and particularly Germany in post-war turmoil, they were ready to move. Tukachevsky was given command of some twenty divisions with which to conquer Poland. By July, 1920, his conquering army had forced the Polish army back as far as Warsaw. The Second Congress of the Communist International held in July and August of 1920, already sure of the fall of Poland, laid down the conditions it would impose upon the old world. Tukachevsky later expressed his confident assurance that had he crushed the Polish army, the Soviet Revolution would have swept "like a furious torrent over the whole of Eastern Europe." The lists of persons to be assassinated in Germany by that furious torrent had already been drawn up.

The Polish Forces

And what was the situation of the Polish forces? Pilsudski, their commander testifies: "The nightmare of defeat and the excuses of poltroons were sweeping over the whole town. I hesitated to place my trust in the morale of the troops and the inhabitants. I noted, moreover, the very poor state of the uniforms and equipment of the troops. I had never in all my experience of warfare seen such ragamuffins . . ." The English eyewitness, Lord D'Abernon said: "Nothing could appear more certain than that the Soviet forces would capture Warsaw." Lord Curzon spoke of the executioner's axe as within an ace of Poland's neck. That was the situation that confronted those who determined, in Chesterton's words:

"To break or be broken, God knows when,
But I have seen for whom."

(The Ballad of the White Horse)

Among these was Achille Ratti, later Pius XI, then Papal Nuncio to Poland and, as was customary, a titular Bishop. His was the See of Lepanto! He realized the issues at stake. When other diplomats had been evacuated, he had secured permission from Rome to stay. Soon after his arrival in Poland he had gone to Czestochowa to pay his respects to the "Queen of Heaven and of Poland" as she is called there, and to secure her blessing on his work. A little more than a year later, he had gone to the famous shrine of Our Lady at Vilna where he had knelt in the snow for a matter of two hours. Now in this crisis of Christendom

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he remained in the apparently doomed city to encourage a people to whom God was entrusting the fate of Europe. On August 6, a great novena of prayer was begun in preparation for the Feast of the Assumption. The city rang with the litanies and prayers of those who walked in processions through its streets.

On the eve of the Feast, Marshall Tukachevsky opened his attack. The Bolsheviks had already named the officials who were to govern the recaptured Poland. The city steeled itself for the ordeal, relying on Mary for the success of a daring plan. On the feast of Our Lady's Assumption, the entire Polish Fourth Army with its auxiliary divisions dedicated itself to God and Mary, Queen of Heaven and Poland. At dawn the next day it moved south, and in two days had outflanked the Communist forces, crushed six of their divisions, captured seven, and sent the rest reeling in disorder back to Russia.

The Question That Confronts Us

The point is this: Eastern Europe was saved by this "Miracle of the Vistula" because there were men who loved what Our Lady loved, and this **initial conformity** of their wills with hers, however tenuous, however weak and hesitant, led them to pray in union with her—and thereby to perfect that union and likeness with her, thus removing the obstacles to God's power which alone is decisive for good. The Miracle of the Vistula begins with human souls conformed with the soul of Mary, seeing as she sees, loving as she loves. The question is: what is the **basis** of this **initial conformity** upon which the entire apostolate of Mary depends?

The answer is clear: the conformity of our wills with the will of Our Lady finds its ultimate basis in the life of Christ which animates both her soul and ours. As every activity presupposes a nature capable of acting, so supernatural activity presupposes a supernatural life capable of acting supernaturally. This is the life of grace, a participation in the life of Christ. Moreover, as every nature is in tendency to its perfection, so our supernatural life is in tendency to its perfection, which is the fullness of grace, the fullness of union with Christ. Hence all who share the life of Christ are radically united in their tendency toward perfect union with Him—in life, in thought, in action. This is the basis of our union with Mary, the basis of all conformity of mind and will with her mind and will. It is then the basis of all that she achieves in the apostolate through intercession.

The Role of This Perfect Member of Christ

There is more: Mary is the perfect member of Christ. The evil which Our Lord overcomes in us, He never permitted even to touch her. And why? Because He wishes to achieve His work of sanctification in a way that permits men to enter it **intelligently**—knowing His goal, following His plan, loving the ideal of perfection to which He brings them and, with them all visible creation. That is why He made her to be from the beginning the created and visible embodiment of His ideal of Creaturehood—that men, and in men all visible creation, might consciously and deliberately pursue the realization of His Plan, united with Him in oneness of mind and heart and life. That is why the Church has Mary

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address us in the Liturgy with these words of Divine Wisdom:

"The Lord possessed me in the beginning of His ways
before He made anything, from the beginning.
I was set up from eternity and of old,
before the earth was made . . .
When He prepared the heavens I was present . . .
I was with Him forming all things . . ."

(Prov. 8:22-30)

So she is always in the Mind of Christ, who lives within us and draws us, by love of her, to unite our wills with hers and to permit her to work through us. He is Himself the Principle of that power by which her apostolate is so effective.

7. IN SUMMARY

Our Lord has summed up the entire doctrine of the apostolate in these words: "As the Father has sent Me, I also send you." The apostolate of the Church derives entirely from Him for both direction and efficacy. He insists on two points: (1) That He looks to His Father for the **plan**: "As the Father has sent Me." (2) That He looks to us for **cooperation**: "I also send you."

He Looks to the Father For Direction

He tells us: "I do always the things that please Him." "My meat is to do the will of My Father." Now Our Lord was sent as Savior. His work is one of restoration: "The Son of Man came to seek and to save that which was lost" And to what is He to restore mankind? To God's original ideal of human perfection—to His ideal conception of human nature, immaculate, full of grace. He achieved this first in Mary. And, by living in man, He strives to achieve it in them, drawing them to it by love of her. That is the deep significance of Chesterton's beautiful line in which he hails Mary as: "The first love of Our Father, the world's first love." (**The Return of Eve.**) The Father has sent Me, Our Lord seems to say: first, that I might make My Mother worthy to be His first love: "The first love of our First Father." And then that I might make all men like her and like Him by making her their "first love" also: "the world's first love."

He Looks to Us For Cooperation

Our Lord gave His Apostles their mission in the words: "I also send you." At the Last Supper He had said: "No longer do I call you servants, because the servant does not know what his master does. But I have called you friends, because all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you." He wishes to be not only the life of men, but also their **light**, to share with them His plan of restoration, to share with them His own **ideal**. "In Him was Life and the Life was the Light of men." "I am come to be the light of the world." "The Light that enlightens every man that cometh into this world." He lives in us, then to enlighten us regarding His Father's plan, which is also His own. That is why Faith is so important—prayer is based on Faith and it is by prayer that we share with Christ His vision of the apostolate. And that is why prayer is essential to the apostolic role of Mary.

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The Mind of Christ

By the prayer of Faith: "We have the Mind of Christ" and see with Him the Church He is forming: "The Church," as St. Paul describes it, "in all its beauty without spot or wrinkle nor any blemish, but holy and spotless." (Ephes. 5:27) —like the Mother of Jesus. This is the Church as divinely revealed to St. John, on the Isle of Patmos as "A woman that wore the sun for her mantle, with the moon under her feet, and a crown of twelve stars upon her head." (Apoc. 12:1) And this woman who is the Church is also the Blessed Virgin Mary who, Cardinal Newman insists, is the reason why the Woman of the Vision was chosen to represent the Church.

In the vision of Mary and the Church, our minds are one with Christ's, sharing with Him His thoughts. No longer servants, but friends who know the plan and order of history by which all things are to be delivered from the servitude of sin.

"And this my seeing is not weak.

The Woman I behold whom all things seek
All eyes and know not; toward whom climb
The steps o' the world, and beats all wing of rhyme,
And knows not; 'twixt sun and moon
Her inexpressible front enstarred
Tempers the wrangling spheres to tune;
Their divergent harmonies
Concluded in the concord of her eyes . . ."

(Francis Thompson: **An Ode After Easter**)

Our Entrance Into the Apostolic Role of Mary

When such a vision of sanctity goes before us in all our ways, inspiring and guiding our apostolic effort, we find the hope and joy that filled the heart of that great apostle of the pen, G. K. Chesterton:

"O go you onward; where you are
Shall honor and laughter be,
Past purpled forest and pearled foam
God's winged pavilion free to roam,
Your face, that is a wandering home,
A flying home for us.
Up through an empty house of stars
Being what heart you are,
Up to inhuman steepes of space
As on a staircase, go in grace
Carrying the firelight on your face
Beyond the loneliest star.

(**The Ballad of the White Horse**)

It is men with such a vision of hope who are able to cooperate with Christ, in His effort to build within Christendom sound institutions which will form men to follow His leadership and build Christian culture and achieve in deeds the triumph of the Faith.

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